Sample Entry

Dashiell Hammett

(27 May 1894 – 10 January 1961)

Charles Brower

See also the Hammett entries in *DS 6: Hardboiled Mystery Writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald* and *DLB Yearbook: 1991*.

BOOKS: *Red Harvest* (New York & London: Knopf, 1929);
The Dain Curse (New York: Knopf, 1929; New York & London: Knopf, 1930);
The Maltese Falcon (New York & London: Knopf, 1930; London & New York: Knopf, 1930);
The Glass Key (London: Knopf, 1931; New York: Knopf, 1931);
The Thin Man (New York: Knopf, 1934; London: Barker, 1934);
Secret Agent X-9, books 1 and 2 (Philadelphia: McKay, 1934);
$106,000 Blood Money (New York: Spivak, 1943);
The Battle of the Aleutians, by Hammett and Robert Colodny (Adak, Alaska: U.S. Army Intelligence Section, Field Force Headquarters, Adak, 1944);
The Adventures of Sam Spade (New York: Spivak, 1944); republished as *They Can Only Hang You Once* (New York: The American Mercury/Spivak, 1949);
The Continental Op (New York: Spivak, 1945);
The Return of the Continental Op (New York: Spivak, 1945);
Hammett Homicides, edited by Ellery Queen (New York: Spivak, 1946);
Dead Yellow Women, edited by Queen (New York: Spivak, 1947);
Nightmare Town, edited by Queen (New York: Spivak, 1948);
The Creeping Siamese, edited by Queen (New York: Spivak, 1950);
Woman in the Dark, edited by Queen (New York: Spivak, 1951);
A Man Named Thin, edited by Queen (New York: Ferman, 1962);
The Big Knockover, edited by Lillian Hellman (New York: Random House, 1966); republished as

The Dashiell Hammett Story Omnibus (London: Cassell, 1966);
The Continental Op, edited by Steven Marcus (New York: Random House, 1974);
Woman in the Dark (New York: Knopf, 1988);
Nightmare Town, edited by Kirby McCauley, Martin H. Greenberg, and Ed Gorman (New York: Knopf, 1999).
Collection: *Complete Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1999).

PRODUCED SCRIPTS:
City Streets, motion picture, original screen story, Paramount, 1931;
Mister Dynamite, motion picture, original screen story, Universal, 1935;
After the Thin Man, motion picture, original screen story, M-G-M, 1936;
Another Thin Man, motion picture, original screen story, M-G-M, 1939;
Watch on the Rhine, motion picture, screenplay, Warner Bros., 1943.

OTHER: *Creeps by Night*, edited by Hammett (New York: Day, 1931; London: Gollancz, 1932);
After the Thin Man, in *Black Mask 5* and Black Mask *6*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Richard Layman (San Diego, New York & London: Harvest, 1986).

Dashiell Hammett is generally credited with bringing a new degree of authenticity as well as artistry to the crime fiction that flourished in the pulp magazines of the first decades of the twentieth century. Hammett created several of the most famous American detectives: the anonymous, world-weary Continental Op; Sam Spade, the cynical protagonist of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930); and Nick and Nora Charles, the husband-and-wife detectives introduced in *The Thin Man* (1934). He based the characters of Nick and Nora on his own relationship with playwright Lillian Hellman. At the time of the publication of *The Thin Man* Hammett was at the height of his fame; however, his literary output ended with that novel because of a variety of factors, including his alcoholism and ill health and to some extent his stormy relationship with Hellman.

At the time of his death in 1961, Hammett's literary achievement had been overshadowed by his unpopular political affiliations. Hellman strove to rectify the situation, in part by idealizing Hammett and their relationship, and the author's continued fame has relied almost as much on a romanticized persona as on his fictional works. Hammett's artistic legacy is a vision of a violent, morally rudderless society in which his charac-

The focus of a DLB entry is the subject's career and reputation. The entry should be organized chronologically. The subject's most important works should be briefly discussed at the points in the subject's biography when they were written or published; the discussion should include the contemporary critical reception of the work.

The first paragraph or two are introductory, briefly giving the reader an idea of the subject's significance.

ters try to navigate with only their own ethical codes to guide them. His prose–brutal, ironic, and slangy–quickly and permanently came to be considered the epitome of the hard-boiled style.

Samuel Dashiell Hammett was born on 27 May 1894 on his grandfather's farm, Hopewell and Aim, near Baltimore, Maryland, to Richard and Annie Bond Hammett. His education was limited: in 1908 he left the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute after being enrolled in the high school for less than a semester. Hammett contributed to the family's failing finances with a series of office jobs. In 1915 he began working for the Baltimore office of the Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, an organization that provided a variety of services from insurance investigations to strikebreaking. He traveled throughout the western United States on assignment for the agency for two years, and his experiences as a Pinkerton operative provided much of the material for his subsequent career as a writer. Hammett found that the life of a detective satisfied his desire for travel and adventure, although some of the activities of Pinkerton agents troubled him: during the sometimes violent labor disputes of the time, operatives were often hired to disrupt protests, with force if necessary. The brutality of his fellow agents helped to crystallize Hammett's leftist sympathies.

Beginning with his induction in June 1918, Hammett served during World War I with the U.S. Army Motor Ambulance Corps at Camp Mead, Maryland. He contracted Spanish influenza, which later progressed to tuberculosis, and received a medical discharge from the army in May 1919. The next year, having relocated to the West Coast and briefly returned to work for Pinkerton, he was admitted to Cushman Hospital in Tacoma, Washington. Hammett was hospitalized at Cushman and another Public Health Service hospital in San Diego from November 1920 until May 1921. During that time he commenced a relationship with one of his nurses at Cushman, Josephine Dolan, whom he married in July 1921 when she was six months pregnant with their first child. The Hammetts eventually had two daughters, Mary, born in 1921, and Josephine, born in 1926.

Hammett continued to work as a Pinkerton operative for as long as his health permitted. In 1921 he participated in two of the most famous criminal investigations of the day, involving the murder charge against movie comedian Fatty Arbuckle and the theft of $125,000 in gold specie from the ocean freighter *Sonoma.* In 1922 he entered Munson's Business College with the intention of training to be a journalist. Hammett supported his family primarily with a disability stipend from the military, over which he was constantly having to wrangle with the U.S. Veterans Bureau.

The entry should give an account of the subject's life, beginning with his or her birth.

The subject's full given name is stated with the date of birth (dates are listed day month year). The parent's full names and professions are also given. Siblings, including age and birthdays, can be included in this paragraph or as they fit into the chronology of the text.

A *DLB* entry must be *objective and impersonal*. It is intended for a wide range of library patrons and should be clear and straightforward. The contributor must avoid intruding his or her own literary opinions. The entry is not a critical essay; it is a reference tool.

The subject is referred to by his/her last name for the rest of the work. First names of the subject or anyone mentioned in text are used only on the first mention.

Hammett turned his serious attention to writing and published his first story, "The Parthian Shot," in H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan's magazine *The Smart Set* in October 1922. Over the next several years he wrote prodigiously, publishing in a variety of genres from light verse and comic sketches to articles for professional journals, but he had his most promising success when he utilized his experience as a detective. In one of his earliest published works, "From the Memoirs of a Private Detective," which appeared in *The Smart Set* in March 1923, Hammett offers twenty-nine brief–some only a sentence long–anecdotes and insights from his Pinkerton years. This article already demonstrates two of the most notable characteristics of Hammett's writing: a dry sense of humor and a cynical view that criminality is a basic human quality. The final entry, in fact, comments on the commonness of lawbreaking and the relative ineffectiveness of investigators: "29. That the lawbreaker is invariably sooner or later apprehended is probably the least challenged of extant myths. And yet the files of every detective bureau bulge with the records of unsolved mysteries and uncaught criminals."

The literary present tense is used when discussing a subject's works.

Hammett found his greatest success in another magazine founded by Mencken and Nathan, *Black Mask*, a pulp devoted to stories of crime and adventure. In October 1923 he published "Arson Plus," his first *Black Mask* story featuring a nameless operative for the Continental Detective Agency. *Black Mask* readers took to the character immediately, and Hammett published almost exclusively in the pulp for the next three years, featuring the Continental Op, as he is conventionally known, in twenty-six stories.

When a title is given, either of a subject's work or a cited source, the date is included with the first mention. The date is either embedded in the text or given in parenthesis after the title.

The Op has few of the exaggerated qualities possessed by the heroes usually featured in pulp fiction. He is short and thick with middle age. He has years of experience and a native toughness and resourcefulness: as he puts it in "The Whosis Kid" (March 1925), "Most of those who meet sudden ends *get themselves* killed. I've had twenty years of experience at dodging that. I can count on being one of the survivors of whatever blow-up there is." He is more tenacious than cerebral, although he demonstrates formidable deductive skills as well. He is not above ruthlessness if a situation warrants. In "The Gutting of Couffignal" (December 1925), for example, the Op, assigned to guard the presents at a lavish wedding, rallies an island community against a criminal gang of Russian expatriates. At the end of the story, hobbled by a twisted ankle, he shoots the beautiful Princess Zhukovski in the leg as she tries to flee, despite her confidence that he will not:

> I had never shot a woman before. I felt queer about it.

> "You ought to have known I'd do it!" My voice sounded harsh and savage and like a stranger's in my ears. "Didn't I steal a crutch from a cripple?"

The Op is above all a professional. Hammett does not give him much of a past or any significant relationships outside of his job. Each Op story begins with his investigation of a case and ends when that investigation is resolved. In most stories he offers insights into the profession gained from his twenty-odd years of experience. In "Zigzags of Treachery" (1 March 1924) he gives the four rules for following a subject: "Keep behind your subject as much as possible; never try to hide from him; act in a natural manner no matter what happens; and never meet his eye. Obey them, and, except in unusual circumstances, shadowing is the easiest thing a sleuth has to do." In the story he also gives advice on interrogating a suspect and the most effective way to shoot a man. In "The Girl with the Silver Eyes" (June 1924) the Op ruminates on the unsavory professional necessity of dealing with informants: "But detecting is a hard business, and you use whatever tools come to hand. This Porky was an effective tool if handled right, which meant keeping your hand on his throat all the time and checking up every piece of information brought in."

Beginning in 1924 Hammett used some of his stories to rehearse the themes, situations, and characterizations that he later used in his novels. In "The House in Turk Street" (15 April 1924), for example, Hammett places the Op among an exotic assortment of criminals similar to Caspar Gutman and his associates in *The Maltese Falcon*. He soon began to tire of the character, however, and the worst Op stories show that Hammett was not immune to lazy, indifferent writing. After *Black Mask* editor Phil Cody rejected two of his stories, he perhaps disingenuously admitted in a letter–which Cody published in the magazine in August 1924–that "the trouble is that this sleuth of mine has degenerated into a meal-ticket."

Nevertheless, Hammett continued to publish new Op adventures nearly every month. The Op stories of 1925, such as "The Gutting of Couffignal," escalate the level of violence in accordance with *Black Mask* readers' bloodthirsty tastes. "The Scorched Face" (May 1925) has similarities to *The Dain Curse* (1929) in its depiction of a religious cult that fronts for a blackmail ring. "Corkscrew" (September 1925), in which the Op travels to an Arizona border town and pits crooks against each other to stop the smuggling of illegal aliens, clearly anticipates *Red Harvest* (1929). In "Dead Yellow Women" (November 1925), a sordid tale of tong wars and smugglers, the Op matches wits with an Oriental villain, Chang li Cheng; the story expresses Hammett's

A *DLB* entry should be tightly written, without "floweriness"; since the *DLB* is a scholarly work, a conversational, informal, "chatty" tone is to be avoided.

Every quotation must cite the source from which the quotation is taken and the date. Do not include quotations without a source.

penchant for exoticism, which also informs *The Dain Curse* and *The Maltese Falcon.*

Most important to these early stories is Hammett's developing literary voice. An essential element of Hammett's style is his knack for concise, evocative detail. The Op's eye for detail is one marker of his professional competence: his success at his job–and possibly his life–depends on his ability to discern telling characteristics.

Hammett became adept at using flat understatement, which he put to a variety of purposes. In "The Scorched Face" he uses it to convey effectively the horror of discovering a body in the woods: "At the base of the tree, on her side, her knees drawn up close to her body, a girl was dead. She wasn't nice to see. Birds had been at her." The Op understates for comic effect as well, as in his description from the same story of an interview subject: "a sleek-haired young man whose very nice manners and clothes completely hid anything else–brains for instance–he might have had. He was very willing to help me, and he knew nothing. It took him a long time to tell me so. A nice boy." Mostly, though, the Op's penchant for understatement tends to emphasize how tough he is, despite his frequent protests to the contrary. In "The Whosis Kid," for example, he coolly considers strategy in a fight with a larger opponent: "I've always had a reasonable amount of pride in my ability to sock. It was disappointing to have this big heaver take the best I could give him without a grunt. But I wasn't discouraged. He couldn't stand it forever. I settled down to make a steady job of it."

In one of his more impressive early efforts, "The Tenth Clew" (January 1924), Hammett uses a subdued irony reminiscent of Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1898). The Op is knocked off a ferry into the fogbound San Francisco Bay; although he initially keeps his cool in this desperate situation, exhaustion begins to set in: "But for the moaning horns I would have ceased all effort. They had become the only disagreeable part of my situation–the water was pleasant, fatigue was pleasant. But the horns tormented me. I cursed them petulantly and decided to swim until I could no longer hear them, and then, in the quiet of the friendly fog, go to sleep. . . ." Finally, a passing boat rouses his failing will: "Life–the hunger of life–all at once surged into my being."

At other times Hammett employs an impressionistic style, relying on little more than a series of disjointed sensory details to suggest chaotic action. In "The Scorched Face" a deadly fight is conveyed through staccato images:

> A body came out of nowhere, hit my back, flattened me to the landing.
>
> The feel of silk was on my cheek. A brawny hand

was fumbling at my throat.

I bent my wrist until my gun, upside down, lay against my cheek. Praying for my ear, I squeezed.

My cheek took fire. My head was a roaring thing, about to burst.

The silk slid away.

Pat hauled me upright.

We started down the stairs.

Swish!

A thing came past my face, stirring my bared hair.

A thousand pieces of glass, china, plaster, exploded upward at my left.

Hammett took a hiatus of nearly a year from writing fiction beginning in 1926, spurred by a conflict with the *Black Mask* management over payment as well as by the necessity to find more secure employment after the birth of his second daughter. In March 1926 he began writing advertising copy for the Albert S. Samuels Jewelry Company. He developed a close personal bond with the owner of the company, Albert Samuels, who served as something of a patron to the aspiring writer, encouraging his ambitions and accommodating his frequent infirmity. Hammett dedicated *The Dain Curse* to Samuels and named several of its characters after his Samuels Jewelry coworkers.

Hammett's chronic health problems worsened, however, necessitating that he give up working full time for Samuels and live essentially separately from his family after July 1926. Despite his condition, he drank heavily and pursued a series of sexual affairs. Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1931) is dedicated to one of his lovers, Nell Martin, who dedicated her novel *Lovers Should Marry* (1933) to him. He also returned to writing fiction, at the invitation of former infantry captain Joseph T. Shaw, the new editor of *Black Mask,* who considered Hammett the exemplar of the direction in which he intended to take the pulp. In January 1927, the same month that *Black Mask* announced his return, Hammett began a stint of nearly three years reviewing mystery novels for *The Saturday Review of Literature,* a position he probably gained with Shaw's help.

Hammett revived the Op with his longest works to that point, a pair of connected stories that together came to about thirty-five thousand words. In "The Big Knockover," which appeared in February 1927, the Op gets a tip that an army of criminals are in San Francisco to pull a big bank heist. The heist, which involves robbing two banks simultaneously in broad daylight, is carried off with the efficiency of a military campaign. Afterward the mastermind begins to kill off his cohorts for their share of the take. The Op follows the grisly trail, finding a series of corpses that, as he observes, comprises a "*Who's Who in Crookdom.*" Only at the end of the story does he learn that the mastermind is a little

A *DLB* entry is supposed to trace the author's career through his or her works, not serve as a substitute for reading those works. The discussion of a work should generally not take up more than a paragraph or two (and these should not be exceptionally long paragraphs), and of that, the plot summary should consist of only a few sentences.

old Greek man he had unwittingly allowed to get away. In the sequel, "$106,000 Blood Money," published in the May 1927 issue of *Black Mask*, the Op is still on the trail of Papadopoulos, whom he eventually locates with the help of the brother of one of the crooks the old man double-crossed. Hammett also provides a foil character for the dogged Op in Jack Counihan, a feckless rookie Continental operative who sells his loyalties to Papadopoulos.

"The Big Knockover" and "$106,000 Blood Money" demonstrate Hammett's growing command of his craft. In keeping with the *Black Mask* template, both stories feature terrific levels of violence: "The Big Knockover" includes more than a score of dead bodies, and both end with shootouts inside the villains' lair. They also showcase Hammett's encyclopedic command of underworld lore, as exemplified by his précis of the heist conspirators:

> There was Dis-and-Dat Kid, who had crushed out of Leavenworth only two months before; Sheeny Holmes Snobomish Shitey, supposed to have died a hero in France in 1919; L. A. Slim, from Denver, sockless and underwearless as usual, with a thousand-dollar bill sewed in each shoulder of his coat; Spider Girrucci wearing a steel-mesh vest under his shirt and a scar from crown to chin where his brother had carved him years ago; Old Pete Best, once a congressman; Nigger Vojan, who once won $175,000 in a Chicago crap-game–*Abracadabra* tattooed on him in three places; Alphabet Shorty McCoy; Tom Brooks, Alphabet Shorty's brother-in-law, who invented the Richmond razzle-dazzle and bought three hotels with the profits; Red Cudahy, who stuck up a Union Pacific train in 1924; Denny Burke; Bull McGonickle, still pale from fifteen years in Joliet; Toby the Lugs, Bull's running-mate, who used to brag about picking President Wilson's pocket in a Washington vaudeville theatre; and Paddy the Mex.

The main female characters in the stories, Big Flora and Nancy Regan, anticipate women that appear in the novels. Big Flora, one of the heist ringleaders, whom the Op assists in removing a bullet from a fellow crook, is as formidable as Dinah Brand of *Red Harvest* and Hammett's other amoral gang molls. At one point the Op remarks about Big Flora: "If I live to be a million I'll never forget the picture this handsome brutal woman made coming down those unplaned cellar stairs. She was a beautiful fight-bred animal going to a fight." Nancy, a socialite with an attraction for the underworld, represents a type that also includes Opal Madvig in *The Glass Key* and Dorothy Wynant in *The Thin Man.*

The stories also show that Hammett was thinking more seriously about the implications of the

The primary intended audience for the *DLB* is the university and college undergraduate student. Therefore, no specialized knowledge or background on the part of the reader is to be presupposed. Any terms that are not included in *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition, should be defined and explained.

hard-boiled code embodied by the Op. Several times in the stories the Op voices the weary cynicism that finds its fullest expression in *Red Harvest*. Young Counihan, portrayed initially as a well-intentioned idiot, betrays not only the Op's growing affection for him but also his professional ethic and, ultimately, himself, as the Op tells him:

> The money Papadopoulos showed you didn't buy you. You met the girl and were too soft to turn her in. But your vanity–your pride in looking at yourself as a cold proposition–wouldn't let you admit it even to yourself. You had to have a hard-boiled front. So you were meat to Papadopoulos' grinder. He gave you a part you could play to yourself–a super-gentleman-crook, a mastermind, a desperate suave villain, and all that kind of romantic garbage. That's the way you went, my son. You went as far as possible beyond what was needed to save the girl from the hoosegow–just to show the world, but chiefly yourself, that you were not acting through sentimentality, but according to your own reckless desires. There you are. Look at yourself.

The Op's speech shows that Hammett was already considering the issues of loyalty and betrayal that dominate his best novels. Most famously, the climax of *The Maltese Falcon* turns on Spade's wrestling with the same issues that Counihan faces, although with much more compelling complexity.

Hammett explores further the implications of the Op's professional code in "The Main Death" (June 1927), one of the last stories he published before concentrating on novel writing. The Op's client is an unsavory old man, Bruno Gungen, whose assistant, Main, has been murdered and robbed of $20,000 of Gungen's money; Gungen is more concerned, however, with evidence that seems to point to adultery between his young wife and Main. The Op plays loose with the law and his professional obligations: he establishes that the Main death was a suicide, which his wife tried to cover up for the sake of the life insurance; he steals back the stolen money from the thieves and lies about evidence in order to protect Mrs. Gungen's privacy from her repulsive husband. "The Main Death" is a good illustration of Hammett's ethical vision as described by Donald T. Bazelon in "Dashiell Hammett's Private Eye: No Loyalty Beyond the Job": "The question of doing or not doing a job competently seems to have replaced the whole larger question of good and evil."

Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*, was published by Knopf in February 1929. It originally appeared in *Black Mask* from November 1927 to February 1928 as four interrelated stories: "The Cleansing of Poisonville," "Crime Wanted–Male or Female," "Dynamite," and "19th Murder." Hammett reworked the four parts

into a cohesive narrative and submitted the whole to Knopf, who recommended further, more substantial revisions. Despite the revisions, *Red Harvest* is still the most episodic of his novels. The Continental Op comes to the mining town of Personville at the behest of the town's crusading newspaper editor, who is murdered the night the Op arrives. He finds a town that its inhabitants call "Poisonville," run completely by bootleggers, racketeers, and corrupt policemen. Although *Red Harvest* is not explicitly a political novel, it is informed by the labor unrest Hammett had witnessed during his years as a Pinkerton op. Responsibility for the corrupt state of Personville is laid squarely at the feet of its leading capitalist, Elihu Willsson, who brought the gangsters to town to break a mining strike ten years earlier. Willsson, father of the murdered newspaper editor, grudgingly hires the Continental Agency to clean up Personville in any manner the Op sees fit.

The Op proceeds to pit the leading crooks of Personville–Whisper Thaler, Pete the Finn, Lew Yard, and the crooked police chief, Noonan–against each other. After he establishes that Don Willsson was murdered by a romantic rival, the elder Willsson wants to call off their arrangement and let Personville's criminals return to business as usual. The Op takes malicious pleasure in telling him that he intends to honor their contract: "I've got ten thousand dollars of your money to play with. I'm going to use it opening up Personville from Adam's apple to ankles. I'll see you get my reports regularly as possible. I hope you enjoy them."

Red Harvest is the most elaborately plotted of Hammett's novels. Almost everyone in the large cast of characters practices some manner of subterfuge, usually either to protect himself or implicate someone else. The French novelist André Gide, in the 7 February 1944 *New Republic*, praised Hammett's dialogue, "in which every character is trying to deceive all the others and in which the truth slowly becomes visible through a fog of deception." There are several possible suspects in each of the key murders in the novel. Complicating matters further is the Op's self-confessed "very un-nice part," as he purposefully withholds information at times in order to stoke the animosity among the criminal factions. He allows Noonan to think that Thaler killed Noonan's brother, for example, even though the Op knows that the real killer is one of the chief's former deputies.

The Op forms a partnership of sorts with Dinah Brand, a carelessly alluring seductress who is intimate with Personville's underworld. He describes her with characteristic irony:

> She was an inch or two taller than I, which made her about five feet eight. She had a broad-shouldered, full-breasted, round-hipped body and big muscular

> legs. The hand she gave me was soft, warm, strong. Her face was the face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear. Little lines crossed the corners of her big ripe mouth. Fainter lines were beginning to make nets around her thick-lashed eyes. They were large eyes, blue and a bit blood-shot.
>
> Her coarse hair–brown–needed trimming and was parted crookedly. One side of her upper lip had been rouged higher than the other. Her dress was of a particularly unbecoming wine color, and it gaped here and there around one side, where she had neglected to snap the fasteners or they had popped open. There was a run down the front of her left stocking.
>
> This was the Dinah Brand who took her pick of Poisonville's men, according to what I had been told.

The Op seems to admire most Dinah's mannish qualities: her physical strength and proficiency with a gun, her tough talk, and her ability to hold her liquor. She readily cooperates with him, giving him the information–not necessarily reliable–that he uses to pit the rival gangsters of Personville against each other.

The Op's machinations culminate in a peace conference at the home of Elihu Willsson, ostensibly to resolve the simmering conflicts "without turning Personville into a slaughterhouse." Actually, the Op intends for the conference to have precisely that effect. He lies to the assembled group, telling them that Noonan knew all along that Thaler was not his brother's killer, thus assuring the corrupt chief's doom at the hands of the vengeful Whisper. After the meeting he confesses to Dinah that he's afraid he's gone "blood-simple," arranging murders out of sheer sadistic pleasure: "I looked at Noonan and knew he hadn't a chance in a thousand of living another day because of what I'd done to him, and I laughed, and felt warm and happy inside." To calm him Dinah gives him laudanum, a liquid form of opium; when he wakes up after a night of hallucinatory dreams, he finds himself holding Dinah's icepick, with its point plunged into her breast.

The Op relies on Reno Starkey, one of Personville's gangsters, to provide him an alibi but nonetheless soon finds himself under suspicion of murdering not only Dinah but also a lawyer who was intending to extort him. Meanwhile, the "red harvest" continues, leaving all of Poisonville's original gangleaders dead or dying. The Op returns to old Willsson and blackmails him into having the national guard brought in to restore order to the town. Lastly, he exonerates himself of Dinah's murder, extracting a confession from the mortally wounded Starkey. The Op spends a week on his reports after leaving Personville, but his efforts to put his activities in a positive light are futile: "They didn't fool the Old Man. He gave me merry hell."

Response to *Red Harvest* was enthusiastic, with most reviewers seemingly thrilled by its sensational

aspects. Herbert Asbury, writing in the March 1929 *Bookman*, called it "the liveliest detective story that has been published in a decade" and referred to the murder of Dinah Brand as an "excellent crime" and "one of the high points" of the novel. Asbury compared Hammett favorably to Ernest Hemingway, a subject to which reviewers and scholars have often returned. The stylistic similarities between the two authors are readily apparent: both favor unadorned–at times opaque–descriptions and characterization. Less superficially, critics recognized that Hammett had imbued the crime genre with a world-weariness and existential anxiety similar to Hemingway's modernism. It is a quality Gide refers to in his journals as Hammett's "implacable cynicism."

The extent of the Op's ethical crisis in *Red Harvest* was unprecedented in American crime fiction. He not only arranges murders and stirs the boiling hatreds of Personville–and in the process goes "blood-simple"–but also for the last several chapters is unconvinced of his own innocence in Dinah's murder. When Reno Starkey asks him "How the hell did you figure you didn't croak her?," he responds, "I had to take it out in hoping I hadn't, till just now." Although he is relieved of direct guilt in that crime, by his own admission he bears responsibility for at least a dozen deaths. Moreover, he acknowledges that his efforts are probably of transient value: in the middle of the night he presents Personville back to Willsson, "all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again." The Op's recognition of his existential plight differentiates him, as John Cawelti notes in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), "from a bloodthirsty manhunter like Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer," whose similar ruminations border on self-parody.

Hammett's triumph in *Red Harvest* was to combine the moral questioning usually associated with serious literature with bloody action and terse, often hilarious dialogue. Lines such as "I haven't laughed so much since the hogs ate my kid brother" place him in a warped tradition of American humor descended from Mark Twain, another writer who lived in San Francisco for a time. The similarities between Hammett and Twain were expounded upon by Frederick Gardner in the 31 October 1966 *Nation:* Hammett "did for slang . . . what Twain had previously done for the American vernacular: used it on the level of art. . . . He selected the witty, colorful elements of the jargon and used them naturally, knowledgeably, without dazzling or digressing for the sake of innovation but always to progress the story." In addition to their mutual virtuosity with the language, Gardner observes, the two writers share a moral vision "torn between fondness for human beings and disgust over

their depravity." The opening of the novel has been frequently celebrated by critics for its brilliant evocation of hard-boiled speech, as well as the efficiency with which it sets the tone for the action to come:

> I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.

Hammett began his second novel, *The Dain Curse,* immediately upon completing *Red Harvest.* It also first appeared serially in *Black Mask,* from November 1928 to February 1929. With its generational curse, incest, drug use and brainwashing, religious cultism, and diabolical mastermind for a villain, the plot of *The Dain Curse* is Hammett's most exotic. In fact, the novel is filled with the sort of fantastic detail that Hammett tended to laugh at as a book reviewer; in a 1932 interview with Elizabeth Sanderson for *The Bookman,* he referred to the novel as "a silly story." Despite his deserved reputation for realism, Hammett also at times made use of the lurid conventions of the pulp genre.

Like *Red Harvest, The Dain Curse* was clearly written with serial publication in mind. The novel is sustained by the relationship at its center, between the Continental Op and Gabrielle Leggett, a deeply troubled young woman who believes herself to be the latest bearer of a curse passed down through her mother's family, the Dains. The Op meets her while investigating the disappearance of some not particularly valuable, flawed diamonds that were in the possession of Gabrielle's father, Edgar Leggett, a scientist. He quickly senses some dark aspect to the Leggett family, not necessarily connected to the theft of the diamonds.

The disappearance of the diamonds is soon overshadowed by Edgar Leggett's apparent suicide. In the long letter of confession he leaves behind, Leggett reveals a past identity and admits to killing his first wife, Gabrielle's mother, out of love for his sister-in-law, the current Mrs. Leggett; he had since lived as a fugitive, twice killing men–including most recently a private detective whom he had framed for stealing the diamonds–who threatened to expose him. The Op recognizes immediately that Leggett's confession is a fraud and that he was actually murdered. Alice Leggett reveals her true madness, asserting that she used Gabrielle, then five years old, to murder the girl's mother, training her to play a game in which she held a gun to the woman's head as she slept.

The twisted secrets of the Dain-Leggett family are only the first of many plot convolutions in the novel. Gabrielle does indeed seem to be at the center of a considerable amount of misfortune, usually involving fatal violence. Each time the Op comes to be involved: he rescues her from the Temple of the Holy Grail, a religious cult–"the fashionable one just now," as one character calls it–in the process killing its insane leader, Joseph Haldorn, who suffers from delusions of godhood; and he is called to Quesada, California, after Gabrielle elopes, only to find her new husband dead and her kidnapped. The Op comes to suspect that the source of Gabrielle's calamities is not a family curse but rather the devious activities of one person.

Ultimately, novelist Owen Fitzstephan, a friend of the Leggett family whom the Op knows from a previous investigation, is revealed to be the most thoroughly besotted with Gabrielle of all, the éminence grise that has been manipulating her life; he murdered her father, aunt, doctor, and husband. He reveals that he himself is a Dain, cousin to Gabrielle's mother. The Op infuriates Fitzstephan, who barely survives his own accomplice's attempt to kill him with explosives, by accepting his courtroom insanity plea at face value: "As a sane man who, by pretending to be a lunatic, had done as he pleased and escaped punishment, he had a joke–if you wanted to call it that–on the world. But if he was a lunatic who, ignorant of his craziness, thought he was pretending to be a lunatic, then the joke–if you wanted to call it that–was on him."

More satisfactory than the exposing of Fitzstephan is the Op's curing Gabrielle of her addiction to morphine. The detective's evolving feelings for the young woman, from initial scorn to compassion and implied deeper affection, perhaps represent Hammett's effort to redeem him after the "very un-nice doings" of *Red Harvest*. Her strange features–she has "a pointed chin and extremely white, smooth skin"; large eyes that change colors between green and brown; "remarkably small" forehead, mouth, and teeth; and ears that have "no lobes, and were queerly pointed at the top"–seem to be part of her allure, although to her they represent the physical expression of her cursed nature. Her faith that the Op will dispel the curse is touchingly portrayed. Hammett leaves understated the detective's motives for helping Gabrielle through the anguish of withdrawal: "I'm damned if I'll make a chump of myself by telling you why I did it, why it was neither revolting or disgusting, why I'd do it again and be glad of the chance."

The Dain Curse received positive reviews when it was published in July 1929. Bruce Rae, in the 18 August 1929 *New York Times Book Review*, found the resolution "a bit illogical" but praised the "racy narrative

style of the author's detective mouthpiece." Will Cuppy, in the *New York Herald Tribune* of 11 August 1929, recommended the novel "for its weird characters and really astonishing speed." Critics have tended to affirm Hammett's assessment of *The Dain Curse*, however; the novel suffers from implausibility and uneven pacing, with the action broken up by extended confessions and revelatory speeches. Even Hammett's wit seems to fail him somewhat: after the Op kills Joseph Haldorn he quips, "Thank God he wasn't really God."

In *The Dain Curse* the Op resembles conventional detective heroes more than in his previous adventures, primarily because of his tendency to conclude each episode of the novel by expounding, sometimes at length, on the solution to one of a series of mysteries. When he exposes Alice Leggett as her husband's killer in a drawing room full of people–a stock situation of melodramatic thrillers–he cannot resist making fun of himself: "I filled my lungs and went on, not exactly bellowing, but getting plenty of noise out. . . . I didn't give her a chance to answer any of these questions, but sailed ahead, turning my voice loose. . . . '*You*,' I thundered, my voice in fine form now. . . ." Because of the ostensibly respectable milieu in which the novel operates, as opposed to the rougher setting of *Red Harvest*, Hammett has less opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge of underworld argot. The judgment of contemporary reviewers notwithstanding, the dialogue and the Op's narration are considerably less lively than in *Red Harvest* and the best short stories.

Respectability is a thin disguise for intellectual licentiousness and worse in Hammett's portrayal of the Leggetts and their social circle. Early in the novel, Fitzstephan–who could just as easily be talking about himself–refers to Leggett as "mentally, or spiritually, sensual . . . to the point of decadence" and suggests that he has an "abnormal appetite for the fantastic." Fitzstephan is erudite but mostly a fraud: the Op teases him by asking "How's the literary grift go?" By the end of the novel he is completely grotesque, his shattered physical condition manifesting his twisted obsessions. Such depictions of the privileged, whose eccentric affectations are nearly always symptomatic of a more fundamental moral corruption, became a convention of the hard-boiled school.

Similarly, the Temple of the Holy Grail allows Hammett to portray the faddish spirituality typically associated with California culture. The headquarters of the cult, a "six story yellow brick apartment building" on Pacific Avenue in San Francisco, is the setting for the most memorable scenes of the novel. Even the sensible Op is not immune to the phantasmagoric effects of the Temple: while spending the night there he grapples with a glowing, semi-corporeal attacker, a

trick of light and a narcotic gas the Haldorns pump into the rooms of the temple. These eccentric situations and characters, mostly at odds with the Op's more realistic milieu, perhaps demonstrate Hammett's dissatisfaction with the constraints of a genre he had helped create. With *The Dain Curse* Hammett seems finally to have exhausted his interest in the Continental Op: he featured the character in three more *Black Mask* stories before retiring him for good.

Most critics agree that with his next novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett made good on the ambition he expressed in a 20 March 1928 letter to Blanche Knopf, to raise the detective story to the level of literary art. *The Maltese Falcon* appeared in five installments in *Black Mask* beginning in September 1929 and was published by Knopf the following February. The most significant difference between the protagonist, San Francisco detective Sam Spade, and the Continental Op is that Spade is self-employed, and therefore acting primarily in his own interest. The ambiguity of Spade's motives–whether he is led by personal loyalty, professional integrity, or greed–is more the focus of the novel than the search for the identity of his partner's killer or the whereabouts of the Maltese falcon. Hammett emphasizes this duplicity in the description of Spade that opens the novel: "He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan."

Compared to the sensationalistic violence of Hammett's first two novels, *The Maltese Falcon* is restrained. Spade's partner, Miles Archer, and the man Archer was supposed to be following, Floyd Thursby, are killed offstage in quick succession. The police consider Spade a suspect in Thursby's murder, and Archer's wife, with whom Spade has been having an affair, thinks that Spade killed her husband. As he had with the Op in *Red Harvest*, Hammett for a time leaves Spade's guilt a possibility: the police catch Spade in a lie about his whereabouts at the time of Thursby's murder, and the objective narration provides no confirmation of Spade's alibi. Further, Spade is apparently unmoved by his partner's death–he tells his secretary the morning after the murder to have the name on the office door changed from *Spade & Archer* to *Samuel Spade.*

Spade locates Miss Wonderly, the woman who hired him and Archer to follow Thursby, and so begins to penetrate layers of deception surrounding the search for a priceless artifact, a gold statue of a falcon that dates back to the Knights of Malta, or Knights Templar. Wonderly, whose real name is Brigid O'Shaughnessy, is only one of the people searching for the falcon: she arrived in San Francisco days before Joel Cairo, an effeminate "Levantine"; the obese, ostentatious Caspar Gutman; and Gutman's "gunsel," the young psychotic

Wilmer. Spade allies himself with Brigid, even though he knows he cannot trust her, mockingly resisting her efforts to manipulate him. He maintains a grinning, ironic posture with the entire group, in fact, proving himself more than their equal in terms of deviousness. Spade receives the falcon from a dying Captain Jacobi, whose boat, *La Paloma*, brought the statue into the country; he offers to sell it to Gutman for $10,000 and his cooperation in framing Wilmer for the murders of Thursby and Jacobi.

The statue turns out to be a fake, and Cairo and Gutman plan to leave town in search of the real article, although Spade calls the police down on them. He then extracts from Brigid the truth, that she killed Miles Archer. He had known all along that the killer was not Thursby, as she had maintained: "Miles hadn't many brains but Christ! he had too many years' experience as a detective to be caught like that by the man he was shadowing." In a climactic speech Spade justifies giving Brigid to the police with no less than eight reasons, but ultimately he rejects her pleas that they run off together as a matter of male pride: "If that doesn't mean anything to you forget it and we'll make it this: I won't because all of me wants to–wants to say to hell with the consequences and do it–and because . . . you've counted on that with me the same as you counted on that with the others." He allows, though, that things might have been different if the falcon had been real: "Well, a lot of money would have been at least one more item on the other side of the scales." From the police comes the news that Gutman has been shot dead by Wilmer–death continues to haunt the search for the falcon. The novel ends on an ambiguous note, with Spade being rebuked by his loyal secretary, Effie Perine.

The Maltese Falcon was an immediate critical and popular success, reprinted seven times in its first year. The novel was widely proclaimed to have reinvented the mystery genre. Spade's character, particularly, seemed unprecedented to the reviewers: Donald Douglas, in the 9 April 1930 *New Republic*, characterized Hammett's detective as "a scoundrel without pity or remorse, taking his whiffs of drink and his casual amours between catching crooks, treating the police with a cynical contempt, always getting his crook by foul and fearless means, above the law like a satyr." Gilbert Seldes in the *New York Graphic* observed that "the romance of the story is blown to bits by bitter realism." Again there were comparisons to Hemingway, although Spade's and Brigid's exploitation of each other outstrips any of Hemingway's male-female relationships in terms of cynicism. Spade is a huge cad–he avails himself of Brigid sexually, afterward sneaking out to search her hotel room at the Coronet, and later forces her to submit to a strip search to confirm that she

did not palm a missing thousand-dollar bill–but at the same time Brigid is hardly deserving of gallantry.

Spade exemplifies a certain species of American ideal, as Hammett asserted in his introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of the novel:

> He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been and what quite a few of them in their cockier moments thought they approached. For your private detective does not–or did not ten years ago when he was my close colleague–want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander or client.

Nevertheless, Spade is a serious-minded professional as, for example, his careful, thorough search of Brigid's room demonstrates. At the same time, he completely–and proudly–lacks the traditional literary detective hero's high-mindedness, as evidenced by his response to Brigid's appeal for his help: "'I'm not Christ,' he said irritably. 'I can't work miracles out of thin air.'" He can, however, play Gutman, Brigid, Cairo, and Wilmer as effectively as the Op manipulates the racketeers of Personville. But like the Op at the end of *Red Harvest*, he derives no satisfaction from his part in the affair–in Spade's case, he has only the promise of "some rotten nights" to come.

Critics have debated whether or not Spade can be considered a heroic character, or if he fails to meet even his own professed ethical standards, such as they are. Leo Gurko argues in *Heroes, Highbrows, and the Popular Mind* (1953) that Spade acts "simply to save his own skin" and that *The Maltese Falcon* is emblematic of "Darwinism carried to its ferociously logical extreme." Irving Malin (1968), by contrast, sees the novel as a classical romance in which Spade "shares the archetypal qualities of such mythic heroes as Odysseus, Samuel, and Jesus in a peculiarly contemporary way." Hammett's choice of a third-person, objective narration denies readers the same access to Spade's thoughts as they have to the Op's. The consequent "lasting ambiguity of the character," as Julian Symons puts it, is at the heart of the greatness of the novel.

The Maltese Falcon is famous for its objective, as opposed to omniscient, point of view; the reader follows Spade throughout but is not privy to his motives. Hammett perfects his technique of isolating salient details to reveal inner states. Nowhere is this device better illustrated than in the climax of the novel, when Spade finally attempts to justify how he has behaved to that point. Spade's sardonic pose is transformed by

inner turmoil: “Blood streaked Spade’s eyeballs now and his long-held smile had become a frightful grimace.” The ending of the novel maintains this tone, somberly echoing the opening. For Spade another week begins, although his normally casual facade still shows signs of strain: “His face was pasty in color, but its lines were strong and cheerful and his eyes, though still somewhat red-veined, were clear.” The final exchange between Spade and Effie leaves much understated, to considerable effect:

> Her voice was queer as the expression on her face. “You did that, Sam, to her?”
>
> He nodded. “Your Sam’s a detective.” He looked sharply at her, put his arm around her waist, his hand on her hip. “She did kill Miles, angel,” he said gently, “offhand, like that.” He snapped the fingers of his other hand.
>
> She escaped from his arm as if it had hurt her. “Don’t, please, don’t touch me,” she said brokenly. “I know–I know you’re right. You’re right. But don’t touch me now–not now.”
>
> Spade’s face became as pale as his collar.

Hammett also makes effective use of the San Francisco setting of *The Maltese Falcon,* with frequent references to specific streets and much of the action taking place in renamed but recognizable versions of actual locations. Moreover, the story gains plausibility by virtue of the historic reputation of the city for lawlessness and exoticism. The novel takes place in a nighttime world, shrouded in “night-fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant.” As Gurko’s argument implies, Hammett depicts San Francisco as an urban jungle, a vision reminiscent of another, similarly brutal novel set in the city: Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899).

The Maltese Falcon has been adapted for the screen three times, most notably in a 1940 Warner Bros. production directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart as Spade. Although physically the opposite of Spade as described in the novel, Bogart defines the character in the popular imagination. Endlessly referenced and parodied in popular culture, Sam Spade and *The Maltese Falcon* have achieved an iconic status.

Hammett went to Hollywood in the summer of 1930; the motion-picture industry, which had recently made the transition to sound, welcomed writers of good dialogue. With his wit and style, he immediately fell in with a coterie of writers who had their initial success in New York, including Ben Hecht, S. J. Perelman, and Nunnally Johnson. Hammett’s first screenplay, for the 1931 Paramount movie *City Streets*, was a success at the time. More important for Hammett was his meeting Lillian Hellman, a script reader for M-G-M, in November 1930. She was significantly younger than Hammett

and, like him, married, but the two began an affair. The relationship was the most important and sustained of Hammett's life, and it has had considerable influence on how he has been remembered. Although the attraction between them was immediate, their romance was not entirely blissful. Hammett clearly had no intention of giving up sexual affairs with other women, and Hellman reciprocated with her own series of liaisons.

Hammett had already completed his fourth novel, *The Glass Key*, before *The Maltese Falcon* was published. Wary of the book-buying market in the first years of the Depression, Knopf decided to withhold the book until the year after its predecessor was published. The novel appeared in installments in *Black Mask* beginning in March 1930 but was not published in book form until January 1931. Considered by many–including the author himself–to be his best novel, *The Glass Key* is Hammett's further attempt to break with the conventions of detective fiction. The protagonist of the novel, Ned Beaumont, is not a detective–is, in fact, a criminal. Arguably, his most admirable quality is resiliency, embodied in his credo: "I can stand anything I've got to stand." Hammett refers to him as "Ned Beaumont" throughout the novel, as if to discourage familiarity. A self-described "gambler and a politician's hanger-on," Beaumont is lieutenant to Paul Madvig, the chief power broker in an unnamed city based on the Baltimore of Hammett's youth.

Madvig's current preoccupation is to win the heart of Senator Henry's daughter, Janet, which he hopes to do by enabling the senator to retain his office in the upcoming election. Those efforts are complicated, however, when the senator's son, Taylor, is found dead in the street. Beaumont is deputized into the investigation of Taylor's death, but only so he can track down Taylor's bookie, Bernie Despain, who also owes Beaumont a bundle from a horse race the night before. Beaumont's cynical modus operandi in acquiring his money–he goes to New York to extort Despain by framing him for Taylor's murder–epitomizes the tone of the entire novel: characters are motivated almost exclusively by self-interest, for political gain or personal validation.

Beaumont's activities begin to have consequences for his boss when poison-pen letters appear around town, implying that Madvig is obstructing the investigation of Henry's death. The fact that Madvig might be accused of the killing is an indication of his waning political power. Another telling indication is the ascendancy of Madvig's rival, Shad O'Rory, who takes advantage of Madvig's electioneering to make inroads into his control over the city. When Madvig responds by shutting down O'Rory's nightclubs, the rivalry between the two factions erupts into open conflict. Dis-

agreements over Madvig's commitment to the Henrys and his handling of O'Rory drive a wedge between him and Beaumont. Beaumont plans to leave town, but he is drawn back into the gang war, as a hostage of O'Rory's. With a seemingly suicidal obstinance, he endures several days of brutal beatings at the hands of O'Rory's henchman, the animalistic Jeff Gardner.

Although Beaumont and Madvig reunite while Beaumont recovers in the hospital, he continues to mock his friend's folly in courting the Henry family, even in front of Janet Henry. Treachery surrounds Madvig: his own daughter, Opal, sides with O'Rory to see her father punished for killing Taylor, her lover, and seems to be the author of the poison-pen letters, and Janet makes overtures of friendship to Beaumont primarily, as it turns out, to gain his help in hanging Madvig. The suspense of the novel ultimately turns on the nature and extent of Beaumont's loyalty to his boss and friend.

Beaumont's interest in Janet seems to grow even as his worst suspicions of her are confirmed. She has been leading Madvig on, allowing him to romance her even as she loathes him for killing her brother; in fact, she is the one sending the accusatory letters. She also contributes to the final break between Beaumont and Madvig, who tells Beaumont that he killed Taylor in a struggle after the boy witnessed him kiss his sister and that he then foolishly tried to hide the truth to preserve his chances with Janet. In response Beaumont brutally tells Madvig of Janet's true feelings: "She's always thought you killed her brother. She hates you. She's been trying to play you into the electric chair. . . . She was in my rooms this morning telling me this, trying to turn me."

To the end Beaumont continues to pursue his ambiguous agenda. He agrees to help Janet build her case against Madvig, even giving a sworn statement of his confession to the district attorney. At the same time he dispenses with Madvig's enemies, provoking the sadistic Jeff Gardner to kill his boss, O'Rory. Ultimately, he establishes the truth about Taylor's death: that Senator Henry killed his own son and, having learned that Paul has confessed, intends to kill him and thus forever hide what really happened. He had gone after his son the night of his death out of political necessity: "I did not care to lose Paul's friendship through my son's hot-headedness." In keeping with his thoroughgoing selfishness, Henry asks Beaumont to let him kill himself and avoid a scandal, but Beaumont refuses: "You'll take what's coming to you."

Janet is well aware that Beaumont thinks she prostituted herself. He denies any intention of judging

her, although he proceeds to do so anyway, disapproving of her and her father's naked opportunism:

> You're all right, only you're not all right for Paul. Neither of you were anything but poison for him. I tried to tell him that. I tried to tell him you both considered him a lower form of animal life and fair game for any kind of treatment. I tried to tell him your father was a man all his life used to winning without much trouble and that in a hole he'd either lose his head or turn wolf.

Still, Beaumont's existential view of the world leads him not to judge her too harshly. "Whatever you've done you've paid for and been paid for and that goes for all of us." Surprisingly, despite Beaumont's estimation of her and father, Janet wants to leave town with him and he is willing to have her along.

With his rivals neutralized, Madvig is free to begin rebuilding his organization, and he pleads with Beaumont to stay and help. The novel closes not with their reconciliation, however, but with Madvig's devastated reaction to the news that Beaumont and Janet are leaving together. "Madvig's lips parted. He looked dumbly at Ned Beaumont and as he looked the blood went out of his face again. When his face was quite bloodless he mumbled something of which only the word 'luck' could be understood, turned clumsily around, went to the door, opened it, and went out, leaving it open behind him." As in *The Maltese Falcon*, in *The Glass Key* Hammett skillfully portrays intense emotion through evocative objective detail.

The Glass Key garnered Hammett's usual positive reviews, although perhaps inevitably it was judged to miss the high standard established by *The Maltese Falcon.* Bruce Rae asserted in *The New York Times Book Review* on 3 May 1931 that "Mr. Hammett's new book is bound to find favor, although probably not as much as was accorded . . . *The Maltese Falcon,*" and Dorothy Parker–an acquaintance in whose opinion Hammett was particularly interested–praised the novel in *The New Yorker* of 25 April 1931 but observed that it "seems to me nowhere to touch its predecessor." An exception was Will Cuppy, writing in the 26 April 1931 *New York Herald Tribune,* who thought that *The Glass Key* was "about twice as good as *The Maltese Falcon.*"

In *The Glass Key* Hammett's cynicism finds it fullest expression. In the unnamed urban setting, loyalties are precarious, and what loyalty characters do demonstrate is generally misplaced. Madvig, the crime boss, is the most forthright character in terms of his relationships with others, but he is depicted as a fool, blinded by love for a woman who despises him and still living by the rules of his boyhood days "running errands for Packy Flood in the old Fifth."

The Henrys, superficially the symbols of respectability, are revealed to be the most treacherous characters in the novel. The senator is willing to pimp his daughter and kill his son to further his political ambitions; yet, Janet and her brother are also shown to be untrustworthy and manipulative. They are reminiscent of Hammett's other morally bankrupt characters of privilege, the Leggetts in *The Dain Curse* and Elihu Willsson in *Red Harvest.* Beaumont's decision to take Janet with him is clearly received by Madvig as the greatest treachery of all, but, as usual, Hammett leaves Beaumont's motives understated.

As he had in *The Maltese Falcon,* Hammett in *The Glass Key* uses an objective narration that follows the protagonist closely but scrupulously refrains from revealing his motives. Hammett is at his most concise in this novel, his subtle, complex plot borne along almost entirely by dialogue and nuance. Thematically, the novel is most akin to *Red Harvest,* which also presents a whole class of people operating, most unsuccessfully, in a corrupting urban environment. Extended through the large cast of characters, ambiguity of motive takes on the status of a social condition; *The Glass Key* can thus be seen as the fullest realization of Hammett's existential vision.

Beaumont is the most laconic of Hammett's protagonists, at no point justifying himself as Spade does in the climax of *The Maltese Falcon.* Consequently, his character has been the source of critical debate. In *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* (1983) Diane Johnson implies that Beaumont is an autobiographical portrait, Hammett's "most plausible and fallible hero," while William F. Nolan, in "Setting the Record Straight on *Dashiell Hammett: A Life*" (*Armchair Detective,* winter 1984) contends that "Hammett is not creating a hero; he's drawing a portrait of moral failure." The only character in the novel who seems to understand him is O'Rory's henchman Jeff, who calls him a "massacrist." Beaumont does seem driven to act self-destructively, finding grim satisfaction in suffering his way through a losing streak at gambling or Jeff's brutal beatings. In New York after Despain, he recklessly confronts the bookie in one of his hangouts and is sucker punched by Despain's crony. The next morning–sick, shaky, and still drunk from the night before–Beaumont insists on going up against Despain again. Whether motivated by masochism or fatalism, Beaumont's penchant for suffering finds its ultimate expression in his willingness to leave town with a woman he has consistently described as poisonous.

Critics have also debated the significance of the title of the novel. It refers directly to a dream of Janet Henry's, in which she and Beaumont are lost in the woods and hungry. They come upon a house filled

with food but also with poisonous snakes. When Janet tells Beaumont that they managed to outmaneuver the snakes and claim the food, Beaumont accuses her of lying: "It starts out to be a nightmare and winds up something else and all the dreams I ever had about food ended before I got a chance to do any actual eating." Later, as they are leaving, Janet confesses the true ending to the dream: the glass key they used to unlock the door shattered, and they were overwhelmed by the snakes. In *Hammett: A Life at the Edge* (1983) Nolan argues that "Ned Beaumont himself is the key of glass, fragile in character and, at the end, broken." Richard Layman in *Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett* (1981) suggests that the key functions as a more general comment on the events of the narrative, symbolizing the irrevocable consequences of knowledge: "Once a door is opened and you learn what is on the other side, you must live with all that is found there, not simply the best of it, and what is found there can never be unlearned." Whatever Hammett's specific symbolic intent, the title completes the theme of irreparableness that dominates *The Glass Key*.

After writing four novels in less than three years, Hammett took another three years to complete his fifth and last novel, *The Thin Man.* He made a start on it as early as 1930, originally focusing on a detective, Guild, who became the policeman Nick Charles assists in the published version of the novel, and an eccentric inventor, Claude Wynant, whom Hammett retained as the elusive title character. When he resumed the work on the novel in 1933, Hammett was clearly influenced by his relationship with Hellman and his nights spent in bars and at cocktail parties. Finally completed during a period of concentrated effort in May 1933, the novel was published in expurgated form in *Redbook* in December. Knopf's hardcover edition, with the racy passages restored, appeared the following month, in January 1934. *The Thin Man* rivaled *The Maltese Falcon* as Hammett's greatest popular success, although it has subsequently been judged his weakest novel by most critics.

The great success of the novel was due to Hammett's charming creations, Nick and Nora Charles. Nick, a retired private detective, is content to spend his days drinking and managing the profits from his young wife's inherited family business. The Charleses are in New York for the holidays, and the novel consequently has a superficially lighter tone than Hammett's other works. Nick is reluctantly persuaded to help investigate the disappearance of inventor Claude Wynant and the murder of his assistant and lover, for which Wynant is the most likely suspect. The mystery involves the couple with another of Hammett's neurotic families, Wynant's former wife and his two children, as well as

various lowlifes associated with the murdered girl, who was apparently using Wynant.

Nick tells the story with a fixed bemusement, presumably the product of the innumerable drinks he fixes for himself at all hours. Despite Hammett's return to the use of first-person narration, Nick is a different sort of narrator than the Op; although no less observant, he is far less inclined to self-reflection. He is, in fact, even more circumspect than Spade and Ned Beaumont. This change in characterization has led most critics to conclude that the novel lacks moral seriousness. Nick never faces the challenges to his sense of integrity or identity that are essential to Hammett's hard-boiled novels, and consequently *The Thin Man* has nearly always been found to be less compelling than its predecessors.

The novel also suffers from a lackluster plot. Like other literary detectives, as Layman observes, Nick "withholds clues from the police as well as the reader–a defect Hammett objected to loudly when he found it in the work of others. Unlike Hammett's previous novels in which the detectives went hunting for evidence, in *The Thin Man* the evidence comes to Nick Charles." So much of the action takes place in the Charleses' hotel room that Nick quips, "We might just as well be living in the lobby." Hammett gives Nick a history with the Wynants–including the suggestion of a past sexual liaison between him and Mimi Jorgensen, Wynant's former wife–but ultimately fails to make a convincing case that Nick and Nora's involvement with the investigation is anything more than arbitrary. Further, the villain of the novel is the Wynant family lawyer, Herbert Macaulay, by most critics' estimation the least interesting character. The central revelation of the novel, that the elusive thin man, Wynant, has been dead for months, seems of little consequence to any of the characters.

Nonetheless, Nick is an engaging narrator. When confronted by a hopped-up gunman in their hotel room, he exhibits obvious admiration for Nora as well as Hammett's characteristically dry, absurd wit:

> "I got to talk to you," the man with the gun said. "That's all, but I got to do that." His voice was low, rasping.
>
> I had blinked myself awake by then. I looked at Nora. She was excited, but apparently not frightened: she might have been watching a horse she had bet on coming down the stretch with a nose lead.
>
> I said: "All right, talk, but do you mind putting the gun away? My wife doesn't care, but I'm pregnant and I don't want the child to be born with–"
>
> He smiled with his lower lip. "You don't have to tell me you're tough. I heard about you." He put the pistol

in his overcoat pocket. “I’m Shep Morelli.”
“I never heard about you,” I said.

In the comic highlights of the novel, Nick and Nora go to the Pigiron Club, a speakeasy owned by Studsy Burke, an underworld acquaintance of Nick’s. There they drink with Shep Morelli, despite the fact that he threatened them and wounded Nick slightly. Hammett takes these opportunities to return to the same shady milieu he had previously explored in *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key* but with a lighter touch. The visits to the Pigiron Club climax with an unexpected explosion of violence–one of the few incidents of action in the novel–when a belligerent man with a “thin, tremulous, effeminate voice” comes over to the party’s table:

> Morelli hit the fat man in his fat belly, as hard as he could without getting up. Studsy, suddenly on his feet, leaned over Morelli and smashed a big fist into the fat man’s face. I noticed, foolishly, that he still led with his right. Hunchbacked Pete came up behind the fat man and banged his empty tray down with full force on the fat man’s head. The fat man fell back, upsetting three people and a table. Both bar-tenders were with us by then. One of them hit the fat man with a blackjack as he tried to get up, knocking him forward on hands and knees, the other put a hand down inside the fat man’s collar in back, twisting the collar to choke him. With Morelli’s help they got the fat man to his feet and hustled him out.
>
> Pete looked after them and sucked a tooth. “That God-damned Sparrow,” he explained to me, “you can’t take no chances on him when he’s drinking.”

In a taxicab afterward, Nora remarks, “They oughtn’t’ve hit that fat man like that, though it must’ve been funny in a cruel way”–a statement that could serve as a fitting assessment of Hammett’s comic vision.

Hammett emphasizes the happiness of the Charleses’ marriage by surrounding them with examples of failed unions: Mimi Jorgensen, former wife of Claude Wynant, has married an unfaithful fraud; Nick’s broker, Harrison Quinn, is willing to leave his wife for Dorothy Wynant, who has barely disguised contempt for him. Nick and Nora, while perhaps not the most conventional couple, are clearly devoted to each other and are completely open with each other in all matters, including their harmless flirtations. In that regard, Nora at one point asks a racy question of Nick–“Tell me the truth: when you were wrestling with Mimi, didn’t you have an erection?”–that was referenced by Knopf in an advertisement in order to titillate reader interest. Nick and Nora have “one of the few marriages in modern literature where

the man and the woman like each other and have a fine time together," Hellman proudly observed in *An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir* (1969), although she recalled that Hammett told her she also inspired the manipulative ingenue Dorothy and her devious mother.

Nevertheless, in Hammett's depiction of Nora, *The Thin Man* is clearly something of a love letter to Hellman. Nick is regularly moved to comment on his wife's attractiveness. She is the only one of Hammett's significant female characters without any tendency toward treachery or sadism. She is an ideal companion, spunky and adventurous, cultured (her holiday reading is the memoirs of Russian opera bass Feodor Chaliapin), gracious, and good-hearted. Like Hammett's tough gang molls, she is "a woman with hair on her chest," as a policeman says admiringly at one point. Nora seems immediately to captivate almost everyone she meets, particularly detective Guild and Dorothy. In return, she regards Dorothy with an almost maternal affection, even though she is not much older than the girl.

Nora has the last words of *The Thin Man*–"it's all pretty unsatisfactory"–which might be used to describe the tone for the critical response to the novel. Although reviewers welcomed Hammett's return, T. S. Matthews suggested in the 24 January 1934 *New Republic* that the author was "coasting," that "though his New York setting is authentic, and contains some very lifelike policemen, speakeasy proprietors, and 'rats,' the crime and the criminal are in the orthodox tradition." The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* (14 June 1934) faulted the novel for its static quality, observing that "there is little movement in it, if we deduct what goes to the getting of drinks or the making of telephone calls."

Defenders of the novel have made the case that underneath its comic tone *The Thin Man* offers a vision of society fully as corrosive as that in Hammett's earlier work, if not more so. The most historically precise of Hammett's novels, its literary failings are offset somewhat by what A. Alvarez sees as the acuity of "its view of New York just after the crash, with its nervy, slanderous parties, sporadically violent speakeasies, disintegrating boozing, and permanent hangover." Sinda Gregory observes in *Private Investigations: The Novels of Dashiell Hammett* (1985): "The book works successfully on a lighter level, and we can be amused by the eccentricities of the Wynant family and the social lives of the wealthy, yet if we step back we see something else at work that is not amusing and not so light. The first of these perspectives exists exclusive of the second–Hammett never insists that the reader must look beyond the obvious meaning of his novels. But the second perspective–not only is the world neither charming nor gay, it

is painful, destructive, and personally divisive–depends upon the first, for the reverberations between the outward cheerfulness and the inner chill give an unexpected edge to the entire novel."

Hammett's literary career effectively ended with the publication of *The Thin Man.* In March 1934 he published his last original story, "This Little Pig," in *Collier's* magazine. He was for the rest of his life plagued by a profound sense of writer's block. During the early part of the 1930s, however, he was perhaps at the height of his fame, a circumstance that made his lack of productivity particularly galling for him. At one point he expressed the intention to leave behind mystery fiction for play writing, but he apparently sublimated that desire into supporting Hellman's literary ambitions. Her first, extremely successful work for the stage, *The Children's Hour* (1934), was based on a premise suggested by Hammett and benefited greatly from his careful editing and directions for revision. Over the years of their relationship, as Hammett's celebrity waned and Hellman became more prominent, he continued to serve as mentor to her, a role he approached with generosity and conscientiousness.

In 1934 he collaborated briefly on a comic strip for the Hearst newspaper syndicate, *Secret Agent X-9*, with *Flash Gordon* creator Alex Raymond. He also found more work in Hollywood, planning sequels for *The Thin Man* and adapting his story "On the Make" for the Universal movie *Mister Dynamite* (1935). Hammett made a lot of money in Hollywood during the first half of the decade, ultimately selling the rights to his *Thin Man* characters to M-G-M for $40,000 in 1937. His profligacy outstripped his capacity to earn, however, and by the latter half of the decade his career as a screenwriter had been fatally undermined by his reputation for unreliability.

During his time in Hollywood, Hammett also devoted himself to a variety of leftist political organizations, often serving in relatively high-profile positions as an executive officer or celebrity spokesman. He was involved in the activities of the Screen Writers Guild, which since its formation in 1933 had been engaged in rancorous labor negotiations with studio executives, and became a member of the Communist Party in 1936 or 1937. In 1938 he was elected chairman of the Motion Picture Artists Committee, which, like most other communist front organizations of the time, raised money for antifascist efforts in Europe and Asia. Hammett also gave talks on matters literary and political under the auspices of the League of American Writers. His most intense political activity coincided with a fourteen-month period of sobriety, but he resumed drinking and suffered a physical and mental collapse, for which he was hospitalized for several months in 1938.

In the turbulent political climate of the early 1940s, Hammett was a vocal antifascist and opponent of the war in Europe, serving as president of the League of American Writers beginning in 1941. The League officially stood behind the U.S. entry into World War II in 1941, however, and Hammett, anxious to contribute more directly to the war effort, volunteered for military service but was rejected because of his age and ill health. During this period he adapted Hellman's antifascist play *Watch on the Rhine* for the screen and taught writing courses in propaganda techniques. In September 1942 Hammett was accepted into the army, at the age of forty-seven, and assigned to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. A year later Corporal Hammett was in Fort Randall in Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Hammett felt fulfilled by his military service, and he devoted himself to his duties as founding editor of *The Adakian*, a newspaper that circulated among the fifty thousand troops of the Aleutian force.

Discharged as a sergeant in September 1945, Hammett returned uneasily to civilian life. He was still a literary celebrity, with paperback editions of his magazine fiction–including *The Continental Op* (1945), *Hammett Homicides* (1946), and *Nightmare Town* (1948)–introducing his stories to a new readership, although Hammett was receiving little money from them. There were also radio series based on the Op, Nick and Nora, and Sam Spade, the last of which was found to infringe on Warner Bros. and Hammett's ownership of the character. He was also garnering the first appreciative assessments of his contributions to American fiction, notably from British authors Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in their *The Long Week-end: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (1940) and from fellow mystery writer Raymond Chandler in his 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder," in which he famously proclaimed that Hammett "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" and that he "gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish."

Hammett was again drinking heavily, however, with a potentially fatal abandon. As Hellman recalled in *An Unfinished Woman*, "the years after the war, from 1945 to 1948, were not good years. The drinking grew wilder and there was a lost, thoughtless quality I had never seen before." Told by doctors he was drinking himself to death, Hammett was finally able to give up alcohol for good by the end of 1948. He rededicated himself to his political commitments, although American leftists were increasingly at odds because of fractious debates over their allegiances. Hammett's activities, along with those of many others, came under government scrutiny as Communist and un-American. In June 1949 he became the chairman

of the Conference for Civil and Human Rights, and as a trustee for bail fund of the Civil Rights Congress was called to testify in federal court in July 1951. Hammett was eventually found in contempt of court because he would not divulge–and by some accounts did not know–the whereabouts of Communist leaders who had fled bail and the names of other contributors of the bail fund. He served time in prison from July to December 1951.

Because of the dominant anti-Communist sentiment of the time, Hammett was subject to general disapprobation, from which his literary reputation did not recover in his lifetime. Periodicals around the country denounced him in the most extreme terms: a commentator in *Hollywood Life* (13 July 1951) asserted that he was "without any question one of the red masterminds of the nation," and Oliver Pilat in the *New York Post* (23–27 July 1951) wrote an uncharitable five-part assessment of Hammett's career that concluded, "So far as the record shows, Hammett possesses no more of a social or political philosophy now than he did in his Pinkerton days. He is still concerned entirely with doing a job, no longer as an operative for a detective agency, but as an operative for the Communist Party."

Hammett's prison term was not the end of the legal troubles he faced because of his Communist associations. In March 1953 he testified before the Senate Committee on Government Operations, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy, concerning the purchase by the State Department of books by known Communists; the questioning by the senators was acrimonious, and accusations were made that Hammett's invoking the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination was a "voluntary act of self-incrimination before the bar of public opinion." Hammett's books were pulled from State Department libraries around the world, although President Dwight Eisenhower had them replaced when he learned of the action. In February 1955 Hammett was called to testify before the New York State Joint Legislative Committee, again because of his association with the Civil Rights Congress.

In the latter part of the 1950s Hammett was plagued by health and financial problems. His books were out of print; the royalties from his creations had long run out; and from 1951 until his death he was subject to a federal judgment for tax evasion. He did work on an autobiographical novel during this period, "Tulip," which he abandoned sometime around 1953; the extant fragment of it was published in *The Big Knockover* (1966), edited by Hellman. He lived in a gatehouse in Katonah, New York, on property owned by friends until near the end of his life, when he moved to New York with Hellman. He died of lung cancer on 10 January 1961. As a veteran of two wars, Hammett was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, over the objections of commentators in the press who recalled his Communist activities.

Hammett's reputation, in eclipse at the time of his death, subsequently proved to outlast the vicissitudes of political partisanship. His importance to the detective genre is undisputed, and his best novels, *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*, have attained the status of classics of American literature. He has been the subject of four biographies, more than a dozen book-length critical studies, and scores of articles in both scholarly journals and popular magazines.

Hammett has exerted a continued fascination as a personage, as well. His colorful personal history and great charisma were always part of his success during his lifetime, and after his death Hellman sought to salvage his reputation with new editions of his fiction and idealized biographical accounts of him in her memoirs. In 1975 mystery writer Joe Gores paid homage to Hammett by making him the hero of a novel set in 1928 San Francisco, and in 1978 Jason Robards won an Academy Award for best supporting actor for playing Hammett in *Julia*, based on portions of Hellman's autobiographies. He has been portrayed on television, as well, by Sam Shepard in *Dash and Lilly*, a 1999 Arts and Entertainment Network dramatization that drew heavily on Joan Mellen's biography, *Hellman and Hammett: The Legendary Passion of Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett* (1996).

At the end of the twentieth century, Hammett's literary reputation seems secure. New printings of his works continue to appear, and in 1999 the Library of America edition of his complete novels was published. His lean, ironic prose and understated, sometimes mean, sometimes romantic view of human nature has continued to exert an influence, particularly on detective fiction, but also on literature and popular culture more generally, including motion pictures and television.

The closing paragraph offers a summary of the subject's reputation and significance.

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